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Management Humor: Asset or Liability?

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## ABSTRACT

Should managers deliberately employ humor to persuade and motivate staff? A framework is presented for analyzing the role of humor in managerial communications. The framework includes the presenter, recipient, message and medium and elaborates cognitive and emotional reactions to humor by recipients. The framework is applied to analyses of the likely impacts of humor in problem solving and creativity. Facilitators and constraints for the effects of humor in managerial communications are discussed.

*Keywords:* managerial humor, cognitive-affective variables, communication, persuasion, problem solving, creativity

## MANAGEMENT HUMOR: ASSET OR LIABILITY?

Humor in the form of jokes, puns, funny remarks and cartoons is a common behavior that flows freely and rapidly through organizations, cutting across authority and status lines (Barsoux, 1996). Humor often presents challenges to managerial plans by highlighting inconsistencies, paradoxes and ambiguities (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993). At the individual level, responses to humor engage both cognitive and emotional processes (Elliott, 1998). Despite its common occurrence and unique properties, humor has received relatively little research attention by organizational scholars, leading Martin (2007), following a comprehensive review of humor research, to conclude that humor remains a “fruitful domain for industrial-organizational psychologists to explore” (p. 361).

The lack of research evidence for the effects of humor in organizations has not been an impediment to the adoption of organizational programs that employ humor, presumably with the expectation of producing positive outcomes. Organizational programs based on humor include, for example: humor rooms (Kodak Eastman, Hewlett Packard), corporate comedians to facilitate communications (American Cancer Society, American Academy of Physician Assistants), clowns to assist in therapy during disaster management (Red Nose Response, Inc.), the use of humor consultants in the conduct of workshops for staff who are being laid off (Owens-Corning Fiberglass), and the utilization of humor in customer service (From a SouthWest Airlines announcement: "There may be 50 ways to leave your lover, but there are only 4 ways out of this airplane").

Definitions of humor have focused on the event or message intended as humor and the different responses to that message. Our interest is on the use of humor as a management strategy and we are therefore primarily concerned with the properties of the humor messages. However, humor messages do not exist independently of responses and consequences of

humor. We therefore need to study the accompanying responses and the processes by which they are produced as well as the consequences of these responses.

The definition of humor responses has a rich and varied history, however, most contemporary researchers agree that the experience of humor involves the interaction of both, cognitive and affective processes (Shammi & Stuss, 1999; Martin, 2007).

Neuropsychological researchers identify the right frontal lobe – the region of the brain in which the integration of cognitive and affective information is believed to occur – as the region that mediates humor comprehension. Damage in the right frontal lobe has been shown to disrupt the appreciation of humor (Shammi & Stuss, 2003). Humor responses include laughing and smiling plus the accompanying range of cognitive assessments and emotional responses, which may include either positive or negative emotions. Most commonly studied are positive emotional responses to acts of humor, including joy, elation and relaxation that accompany genuine, spontaneous and unforced laughter and smiling. On the negative side, humor that belittles or excludes individuals can produce emotional responses such as frustration, anxiety, stress and other forms of negative affect, which may be expressed through forced laughter or smiling. However, there is little research that examines the potentially destructive effects of negative forms of humor (Wood, Beckmann, & Pavlakis, 2007).

Managerial humor intended to produce the responses referred to before, includes the insertion of jokes or other forms of humor into communications, particularly during attempts of influence. Our discussion addresses humor as a managerial communication process and, in order to understand its effectiveness, the responses by the recipient or audience to humor messages, the processes by which they were produced and the outcomes or consequences of these responses. As a communication process the perception of humor will be influenced by the presenter, the recipient, the message and the medium. However, these effects will be

mediated through the encoding of the situation, self-assessments, affective reactions and goals, values, and standards of the target or recipient of the humor. Therefore, our contribution is to present a theoretical framework for analyzing the effects of humor in management communications and other contexts, and the processes leading to different outcomes. The proposed framework can be used to design studies for understanding and evaluating the effects of humor in organizations and to accumulate the results of those and other studies.

The framework is presented in the next section. In order to illustrate the application of the framework it is then used to identify the processes and potential impacts of humor in problem solving and creativity. For each of these two topics, we identify constraints through the consideration of potential moderators. Although the level of research knowledge is not sufficient to allow definitive conclusions, the available studies provide provocative ideas deserving of further research and we use them to formulate some useful predictions that can be employed to guide future research.

### GENERAL FRAMEWORK

Our framework for analyzing the role of humor in managerial communications is presented in Figure 1. Figure 1 is partly based on McGuire's (1985) analyses of the communication process and models of cognitive and affective processing dynamics in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; Mischel & Shoda, 1998). More specifically, Figure 1 identifies the inputs to the humor communication process, stages in the cognitive appraisal of humor plus the related cognitive-affective responses, and the potential outcomes of that process. The inputs include the presenter, the recipient, the message, and the medium. The reactions are described as stages in the cognitive appraisals of humorous communications, including reception and acceptance, leading to outcomes that include opinion and behavior change of the recipient, and problem-solving and creativity. Opinion and behavior change are

typically the most immediate aims of humor. Problem-solving and creativity are more inclusive behavioral processes and outcomes that may include humor as part of communication and influence sub-processes. The role of humor in these more inclusive processes is discussed in a later section as examples of the application of the framework presented in Figure 1.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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### The Communication and Influence Process

Managerial communications can include the transmission of facts, procedures or opinions (Machlup, 1980), and will often include the aim of persuading or influencing staff to adopt a particular point of view or to undertake some particular action. The transmission of facts or keeping staff informed will require understanding, and may not necessarily extend to the need for persuasion to a point of view or influencing behavior. More commonly managers will want to go beyond understanding as an outcome of their communications with their staff and will want to persuade staff to accept a point of view or influence their attitudes and behavior. Creative ideas and innovations often have to be "sold internally". Decisions following problem solving have to be implemented by others in the firm and this is best achieved if these others are persuaded in favor of the decision.

Humor has been found to impact on the understanding, persuasiveness and influence of communications. Work by Schmidt and colleagues (Schmidt, 1994; 2002; Schmidt & Williams, 2001), among others to be discussed later, shows that humorous messages are better understood and more likely to be recalled than non-humorous messages. Evidence that humor facilitates influence comes from a range of areas (Vuorela, 2005; Martin 2007). In negotiations, for example, humor is often used to deal with problems and tensions by

allowing individuals' to express their views in a safe way (Mulkay, Clark & Pinch, 1993; Adelsward & Oberg, 1998). The use of humor has been shown to make presenters more persuasive and more effective negotiators (Filipowicz, 2002; O'Quin & Aronoff, 1981).

Although humor occurs as a message variable, it can also interact with the presenter variable, as well as the medium in which it is employed. Furthermore, the state of the recipient or audience also has to be taken into account. Therefore, humor is potentially relevant for all of the input variables shown in Figure 1 and their impacts on understanding, or influence.

### *Input Variables*

Down the left side of Figure 1 are the input variables from the well-known Shannon and Weaver (1949) model of information transfer. We start with the message, which concerns various types of humor, including both positive and negative humor. We then consider the presenter who we assume to be a manager. Different pairings of the manager and staff can create a range of social contexts in which management communications take place, including one-on-one, one-to-many, and several, as in a small group or network. Finally, we discuss the alternative media for managerial communications that include humor. The reactions of the recipients (that is the audience, who we assume to be staff or other members of the manager's organization) leading to the outcomes shown in Figure 1 are elaborated and discussed in a later section.

### *The Message*

The content of a humor message can be either positive or negative in tone (Kirsh & Kuiper, 2003; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray & Weir, 2003) and targeted at either the self or some other person (Martin, et al., 2003), creating four types of humor. Positive humor directed at the self (type 1) can be self-enhancing or a form of coping that helps minimize stress and facilitates balanced reactions to challenges. When directed at others, positive



humor (type 2), such as jokes and banter can reduce interpersonal tensions and facilitate interpersonal and social relationships. In group settings, positive humor can also help raise group morale, increase identity and cohesiveness by making people feel included in the group and reduce tension during conflicts (Kuiper, et al., 2004). Spontaneous positive humor often creates a temporary feeling of community amongst those individuals who share in the joke, which may become more established with the repeated sharing of humor amongst members of a group.

The two types of negative humor include self-deprecating humor (type 3) and negative humor with others as the target (type 4), respectively. Self-deprecating humor, such as the use of self-disparaging and ingratiating comments made during attempts to gain the approval of others are often viewed by others as “strained and obsequious” and may be seen as evidence of emotional neediness and low self-esteem in the presenter (Kuiper, et al., 2004). Self-defeating humor is often used to mask negative feelings and anxieties or to avoid dealing constructively with problems (Martin et al, 2003; Kuiper, et al, 2004). Negative humor that is targeted at others includes boorish humor and the aggressive use of humor in which the presenter displays a lack of concern or respect for others, including teasing, ridicule, disparagement and sarcastic comments (Kuiper, et al., 2004). Continual targeting of individuals with negative humor will typically alienate those targeted and, depending upon the recipient’s status relative to the presenter, will impair social and interpersonal relationships between the presenter and recipient (Kuiper, et al., 2004, Martin, 2007).

Humor has been found to serve many different communication functions and the impacts vary with the type of humor. For example, studies have shown that positive humor can be used to provide criticism in socially acceptable ways (Grugulis, 2002; Holmes & Mara, 2002), highlight ambiguity (Grugulis, 2002) or deviations from expectations (Ullian, 1976), and to suggest alternative approaches to problems (Grugulis, 2002; Hatch, 1997).

However, not all humor, even when it is of a similar type, has the same effect. For example, although negative forms of humor are often associated with negative outcomes, an experimental study of negative humor directed at others (i.e., type 4) by Dews, et al. (1995) found that ironic criticism of poor performance was perceived as funnier and less insulting and had a less damaging effect on the presenter-recipient relationship than literal criticism. Dews, et al. (1995) linked these effects to the fact that the use of irony protected the recipient's self-concept better than literal criticism.

The type of information to be conveyed is also an important variable. Although, humorous messages are recalled at a higher rate, this is at the expense of the non-humorous part of the communication. Based on a series of experimental studies in which participants had to learn and recall lists of sentences under a range of conditions (e.g., free or cued recall) Schmidt (1994) reports that humorous sentences were recalled at a higher rate than non-humorous sentences but only when they were presented in the same list. In fact, when presented with both humorous and non-humorous sentences participants recalled humorous sentences at the expense of non-humorous sentences. Memory-enhancing effects of humor were also reported for the recall of cartoons (Schmidt & Williams, 2001; Schmidt, 2002), for tendentious (aggressive and sexual) humor (Derks et al., 1998) and for puns (Lippman and Dunn, 2000). Based on the insight of humorous messages being memorized at a higher rate but also at the expense of non-humorous messages, Martin (2007) concludes that humor should be used sporadically (not constantly) when lecturing and with regard to important concepts and not background or peripheral information.

The complexity of the information to be communicated is an example of a message variable that could be expected to moderate the effects of humor. A possible reason why humor should not be used when transmitting complex information is the indirect effects of humor through mood manipulation. Humorous insertions, either at the beginning of or

during communication, usually have the effect of putting the recipient in a relatively positive mood. People in a positive mood tend to engage in more superficial processing of information (Worth & Mackie, 1987) and indeed a series of experiments by Forgas has demonstrated that a *negative* mood may actually be more beneficial in this situation. Research with the "affect infusion model" (Forgas, 1995) has shown that people induced to be in a negative mood just prior to reception of new, quite detailed information tend to be more vigilant and systematic in processing it. Negative mood is typically induced in these experiments by giving people bogus negative feedback about their performance in a test. Negative incidents like this are not uncommon in the day-to-day work of employees. As Forgas (1998, p. 1) explains it, a negative mood is a signal for people to "watch out, be careful." The insertion of a very serious or even moderately fear-inducing statement at the beginning of the complex information, the direct opposite of humor, could actually be a facilitating tactic.

We will see, in the discussions of influence and creativity, that deliberate induction of a positive mood through personally rewarding comments or through the use of humor, can indeed be facilitative of the intended outcomes. But for communicating complex, new information, the induction of positive mood via humor inserts would seem to be a constraint, or even a liability to the reception and acceptance of the information being communicated.

The main mechanism by which humor content appears to facilitate the transmission of simple, straightforward information is through the initiation and maintenance of attention. An insightful review by Zillmann and Bryant (1989) indicates that positive humor, either unrelated to the topic or related but non-distortive, which irony or satire can often be, and suitably spaced humor rather than massed humor, are the effective variables. Negative humor is to be avoided unless the presenter is sure that the entire audience is sufficiently sophisticated to comprehend it. Short periodic insertions of jokes or humorous remarks that

punctuate the straightforward transmission of information are also more effective than one big joke at the front. Although the up-front joke might have a positive effect by inducing a positive mood, the effect is likely to be temporary. How spaced should humor content be? A cue might be taken from a survey of award-winning university lecturers (by Javidi, Downs & Nussbaum, 1988, cited in Boverie, Hoffman, Klein, McCelland, & Oldknow, 1994) indicating that they insert a humorous comment approximately every seven minutes. In the written version, this might translate to every second page or so. Probably through its ability to maintain attention, positive humor seems to render the communication more enjoyable, which is perhaps partly the basis of the awards for teaching (Zillmann & Bryant, 1989). As noted, attention facilitation appears to be the main process responsible, though when we turn to influence in the next section, it will be seen that other processes are also affected by humor.

Proposition 1: The influence effect of managerial humor will be moderated by the complexity of the information being communicated. Specifically, humor inserts will facilitate the communication of simple rather than complex information through the initiation and maintenance of attention.

Proposition 2: For simple information with an obvious message the influence effect of managerial humor will be a function of the type of humor used (positive humor is better than negative humor) and the spacing of the humor inserts (spaced humor is better than massed humor).

Humor in the service of message acceptance has been most widely-tested in studies of influence and persuasion, particularly in the applied field of advertising. The general conclusion from advertising research is that humor is a tactic of quite unreliable standing; sometimes it can work surprisingly well and at others embarrassingly badly, and the contingent conditions for its effective use are difficult to identify (Rossiter & Percy, 1997;

Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). This is not the case in interpersonal influence (Rossiter & Percy, 1997). There are a number of clearly anticipated situations that arise in the course of interpersonal influence in which the presenter's use of humor can be a reliable and effective tactic. One is where the presenter expects that the recipient's or audience's true opinion would be suppressed if directly asked for, so that an oblique and humorous entry may be more likely to bring out the true opinion (Foot, 1991). The type of humor that is usually employed in this tactic is sarcasm, which we classify as negative humor, such as "You don't really think that you need more staff in your department, do you?" when the presenter expects that the recipients of this question believe exactly that, but would be hesitant to state it. Negative, sarcastic questions are often very difficult to evade with a false answer, hence the logic in their use.

Another situation is when the presenter expects that recipients will express a contrary opinion to that which he or she wishes to advocate. The use of ridicule, a form of negative humor, to diminish or dismiss an opposing position is one of the oldest rhetorical devices known and still one of the most effective. It can even be employed on a mass-audience basis if the ridicule involves a vivid and memorable caricature of the opposing position. This is a technique seen quite regularly in political advertising, such as the use of a constantly ringing cash register to imply the cash draining effects of an opponent's tax proposals. However, ridicule as a counter-argument tactic has limitations. Ridicule that is seen as personally directed at a member of the audience or some other target may evoke an empathic response by audience members that leads to resistance to the presenter's subsequent suggestion of an alternative viewpoint. Also, in a group setting, ridicule may not work when the ridiculed position is strongly held by the majority of others present. While tempting to use because it is such a powerful tactic, humorous derogation requires "pre-testing" or sound intuition about going too far or going against too strong a majority.

Proposition 3: The influence effect of negative-other humor (e.g., ridicule) will depend on the match of the humor with the previously held beliefs of the audience, such that the effect will be stronger under high as compared to low matching conditions.

### The Presenter

The presenter in the current discussion is the person who occupies a managerial role. The role will carry status, knowledge and performance expectations. Some of the characteristics that are typically associated with a managerial role and the individual occupants of managerial roles are discussed in a later section as potential moderators of the effects of humor in the managerial functions of problem solving and creativity.

In influence and persuasion, the perceived characteristics of the person presenting the message are core determinants of the outcome. Presenter characteristics can be grouped under the sub-variables of visibility, credibility, power and attraction (Rossiter & Percy, 1997; see also McGuire, 1969). Visibility, or being well-known in the celebrity sense, is not relevant in the usual contexts of internal management, although it is when addressing external audiences such as investors or the general public. Credibility comprises the two specific factors of expertise and objectivity. Superiority humor, a signal of superior language skills, can be employed to increase perceived expertise, especially with a new or occasional audience. On the other hand, and this is a constraint, over-use of humor, of any type, runs the risk of undermining perceived objectivity of the presenter by blurring the recipient's or audience's detection of truthful statements.

Attraction, too, comprises two specific factors, namely, liking, and identification through perceived similarity. Positive-other humor (type 2) can be employed to increase the presenter's perceived likability. Shared "in-group" humor – usually positive humor but sometimes negative humor directed at an out-group (type 4) – can be employed to increase

perceived similarity between the presenter and the audience, leading to increased identification with the presenter and greater acceptance of what the presenter has to say. This has been described as "humor as equalizer" (Boverie et al., 1994). A note here is that the "interrogatory" joke form (Chiaro, 1992) is often not effective as an equalizer. Interrogatory jokes, such as "How many existentialists does it take to change a light bulb?" can leave the audience feeling somewhat deficient from not knowing the answer. Non-interrogatory jokes, on the other hand – exaggerations, puns, and irony or sarcasm, if clearly signaled with tone of voice so that all recipients will perceive it, and also out-group ridicule – have the effect of making the audience feel more like equal participants.

To summarize, the presenter can use different types of humor to increase his or her perceived expertise or familiarity, particularly with a new audience. With a familiar audience this perception has to be periodically maintained but the presenter should not overdo humor of any type lest perceived objectivity or trustworthiness suffer. If, on the other hand, having the audience like or identify with the presenter is thought to assist in acceptance of the advocated viewpoint as research in interpersonal persuasion settings by Cialdini (1993) suggests is the case, then positive humor, or, for identification purposes, negative-other humor (out-group derogatory humor), should be effective.

Proposition 4: The influence effect of managerial humor will depend upon interactions of the aims of the presenter (e.g., attraction) and the type of humor used (positive or negative self- or other directed humor). Specifically, positive humor, as opposed to negative humor (except for negative out-group ridicule), will foster liking and identification with the presenter and, as a consequence, enhance acceptance of the advocated viewpoint.

In organizations, individuals who occupy the role of leader are expected to influence and persuade followers towards the goals of organisations. Effective leaders have been shown

to use more humor than ineffective leaders (Priest & Swain, 2002; Holmes & Mara, 2006; Sala, 2000; Aviolo, Howell, & Sosik, 1999); however, as has been stressed earlier, the effects of humor depend upon the message. Negative humor directed at others (type 4) is associated with less effective leadership, as indexed by lower ratings on leadership behaviors, including task and relationship behaviors (Decker & Rotondo, 2001). Interestingly, gender has been found to moderate the effects of leader humor on leader performance ratings. Employing negative humor was especially detrimental for female leaders (Decker & Rotondo, 2001). Also, subordinates who reported using negative humor claimed that their managers were using negative humor as well (Decker & Rotondo, 1999). Although cause and effect cannot be determined based on this study, it suggests that there is some reciprocity in perceived humor behavior between leaders and subordinates.

### The Medium

The medium is an under-investigated variable in management, especially in light of Marshall McLuhan's (1964) dictum that the medium is (and he meant largely but not completely) the message. Managers have a choice of media through which to accomplish their activities, including face-to-face spoken, telephone spoken, written memorandum, written e-mail, written personal note, internal newsletter, external mass media of all types, and the visual medium of their own observable actions. Quite obviously, the medium chosen affects the form of humor stimulus that can be used, namely a spoken, written, or visual joke, and in some cases affects the audience's response options to the humor.

There is no direct evidence of the effects that different media have on the reception and acceptance of information in messages containing humor. However, the medium chosen will determine the directness of contact between the presenter and the audience and therefore could be expected to influence the likelihood of a humor response. Our hypothesis is that the use of humor in communications will have less impact on the reception and acceptance of



information for indirect media, such as e-mail, memoranda, newsletters and even personal notes. It will more likely have a positive impact on reception and acceptance when a face-to-face medium is used, where humor can be used more effectively to create and maintain attention to the information being communicated. This is because the process can be managed in an ongoing way through the use of qualifications or supplementary comments, based on audience reactions to humor inserts. Humor is less likely to work in written media, electronic or paper, because the presenter is much less likely to be able to accurately anticipate the audience's state of mind and state of emotion. The positive affect characteristic of humor, and its defining responses of laughter, smiling, and cognitive appreciation, is considerably more difficult to elicit universally and thus reliably in written media.

Although influence can be initiated through written media, the bulk of these attempts are in spoken media. Even written initiations are likely to be followed up by the spoken-media channels of a large-meeting address, smaller group meetings, one-on-one meetings, and phone calls. Thus, most influence attempts are, or end up being, "live" and oral. This presents opportunities to inject humor, or to withhold it if it does not appear to be working. Qualitative analyses of public speeches revealed that management "gurus" frequently utilize humor to communicate their vision and core ideas (Greatbach & Clark, 2003). However, an earlier review of studies that have examined the persuasion effects of influential speeches and essays found no clear superiority of humorous compared to non-humorous messages (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992).

Proposition 5: The influence effect of managerial humor will be moderated by the directness of the medium used. Specifically, face-to-face oral humor will be more effective than written or other less personal sources of humor.

## The Recipient

The characteristics of the recipient that impact on their processing and on their responses to humor will include individual competencies and dispositions and, particularly when the recipient is part of an audience, the psychological properties that they assign to their situation. Among the competencies that individuals use when processing social information and generating the thoughts, emotional reactions and actions that define their response to a situation, discriminative competence (Shoda, Mischel & Wright, 1993; Chiu, Hong, Mischel & Shoda, 1995) seems most relevant for explaining individual responses to humorous situations. Discriminative competence refers to individual "... sensitivity to subtle cues about the psychological meaning of a situation, [and] is an important aspect of adaptive social behavior and social intelligence" (Chiu et al., 1995, p. 49). When confronted with a potentially humorous situation, such as receiving a sarcastic email or being told a joke, individuals with a discriminative facility are better able to infer the motives and beliefs of other people and to anticipate the consequences of different scripts and behaviors than those with less of this social competence. Chiu et al. (1995) found that discriminative competence influences encoding and information processing strategies in threatening situations. Those with a discriminative facility were more likely to code information conditionally, to use monitoring strategies when information could make a difference to response choices and to use avoidance strategies when information would have no impact on choice of actions but could add to one's stress.

If, as Mischel and his colleagues argue (Mischel, 1993; Mischel & Shoda, 1998), discriminative competence is a basic social capability, then we would expect the effects observed in the Chiu et al. (1995) studies to generalize to situations that do not involve threats.

Proposition 6: The effectiveness of managerial humor in eliciting a humor response will be moderated by the discriminative competence of targeted individuals.

Specifically, individuals with higher levels of discriminative competence will be better able to encode a message as humorous or non-humorous as compared to their lower level counterparts.

Note, however, discriminative competence will interact with the characteristics of the message to determine the attention to the message plus the comprehension and acceptance stages. For example, the levels of discrimination required in the interpretation of a humor message will vary depending upon how obvious the intended humor is to the audience. When humor requires the recognition of an incongruity that is conveyed through a subtle word play or small changes in tone of voice or facial expression, discriminative competence levels will be positively and strongly related to the humor responses of audience members. Responses to slapstick and other more obvious attempts at humor that do not require any great facility in identifying the intention or the point of the humorous communication will be more consistent across individuals and less influenced by their level of discriminative competence.

Preferences for the four types of humor (positive vs negative and self- vs other directed) have also been shown to have significant relationships with a range of dispositions, including measures of the Big Five personality traits (Martin, et al. 2003; Saraglou & Scariot, 2002). Openness and Agreeableness have been found to be related to the use and preference for positive humor (self- and/or other directed), whereas Neuroticism and lack of Conscientiousness are associated with the use and preference for negative (self- and/or other directed) humor (Saraglou & Scariot, 2002). The fifth factor, Extraversion, is related to high levels of humor production behavior. Kuiper and colleagues (Kuiper, Borowicz-Sibenik, 2005; Kuiper et al., 2005, 2004, Kirsch & Kuiper, 2003) have examined relationships between the two higher order factors of Agency and Communion – that are believed to

summarise various combinations of the Big 5 traits – and humor. Their results show that the positive aspects of Agency and Communion are related to the use and preference for positive humor, particularly adaptive and socially skilled humor, while the negative aspects of Agency and Communion are related to the use and preference for negative humor (Kirsch & Kuiper, 2003). Agency and Communion have also been established as moderators for the facilitative effect of humor on well-being (Kuiper, Borowicz-Sibenik, 2005; see Kuiper et al., 2005, 2004). For individuals who are low on both the Agency and Communion factors the relationship between positive humour and psychological well being measures is much stronger than for individuals who are high on both factors (Kuiper & Borowicz-Sibenik 2005). Thus, humour has a much greater facilitative role on, for examples, positive evaluations of stressful situations and coping responses when people are lacking the personal control and social tendencies that might otherwise provide them with the resources needed for coping.

Proposition 7: The effectiveness of managerial humor in eliciting a humor response will be moderated by personality traits of the recipient as reflected in the Big Five. More open and agreeable individuals will prefer positive managerial humour; while more neurotic and less conscientious individuals will prefer negative managerial humour.

Although not as fixed as traits, the prior mood states of recipients will also influence their reactions to humor, particular when humor is used in attempts to persuade or influence individual recipients or a group audience. Of course, humor may be used to try to make this mood positive, just as a serious or mildly threatening opening may be used to make the mood more negative. A positive mood, either induced or judiciously chosen in the timing of communication when mood is likely to be positive due to naturally occurring circumstances such as a business lunch, is generally the recipient condition that the presenter wants. People

in a positive mood, as we have seen from the work of Forgas (1995; 1998), are less likely to carefully scrutinize the incoming information and are also less likely to generate overt counter-arguments (Petty, Schumann, Richmond & Strathman, 1993). The latter researchers go on to demonstrate that the positive mood facilitation effect on acceptance holds when the topic of persuasion deviates in a minor way from the recipient's standpoint through a direct effect of positive mood and also when the topic is a highly involving issue, where the positive mood means that more supportive thoughts are likely to be generated by the recipient.

But what if the recipient or audience is likely to be in a negative mood that cannot be readily neutralized or reversed by the presenter? How should the presenter use humor to influence the encoding of the message? Some fascinating research by Petty and his colleagues (Wegener, Petty & Klein, 1994) indicates that the presenter should deliberately choose a "negative frame" for an influence attempt if the recipient or audience is known to be in a negative mood and a "positive frame" if the recipient or audience is known to be in a positive mood. A negative frame emphasizes the negative consequences of not adopting the advocated position, e.g., "If we don't increase our research output next year, we'll fall behind other leading universities." A positive frame emphasizes the positive consequences of adopting the advocated position, e.g., "If we increase our research output next year, we will continue to be one of the leading universities." Notice that the advocacy and its consequences are the same but the first frame emphasizes the negative whereas the second emphasizes the positive. The researchers show that the "choose the frame to fit the mood" effect works because people in a negative mood believe negative consequences will have a greater likelihood of occurring, whereas people in a positive mood believe positive consequences will have a greater likelihood of occurring. The distinction is similar to that in operant learning theory between negative and positive reinforcement, both of which increase the target behavior, but through different mechanisms. Typically, humor would be a

constraint in negative framing, with possible exceptions including in-group ridicule, whereas it would typically not be out of place in positive framing. Remember, we have excluded here the possibility of using humor beforehand to change the recipient's mood, restricting this situation to one of having to "go with the flow." In any event, the results of the Wegener et al., (1994) study demonstrate the need to take the recipient variable into account when deciding whether or not to inject humor into the message and on the content of the humor.

### *Response Variables*

McGuire (1985) identifies a series of internal responses that focus exclusively on the processing of communications leading to action outcomes but, as with other communication models, does not consider the encoding, self-assessments, affective reactions and self-set goals, values and standards that occur in parallel and interaction with the processing of the message. The message processing responses as shown in Figure 1 include, attention and, comprehension of the humor episode, acceptance of (or convergence on) one outcome, and retention and retrieval of the outcome.

### *Stages of Cognitive Appraisal*

Not all of the cognitive appraisal responses shown in Figure 1 are involved in the processing of all managerial humor communications. For instance, acceptance (or convergence in problem solving and creativity) is not necessarily involved in the communication of information, because comprehension is sufficient, although some sort of acceptance is often implicit. Likewise, retention and retrieval may not be necessary responses if the action outcome is to be immediate. The important aspect of McGuire's response-sequence approach is his emphasis on the two broad processes of *reception* (attention and comprehension of the target information) and *acceptance* (acceptance or convergence and retrieval, if required). The probability of an outcome is the joint probability of reception and acceptance.

Humor, like other communication tactics, may facilitate reception while inhibiting acceptance, or vice versa. Surprisingly, tactics rarely facilitate both reception and acceptance. For instance, humor can produce a complex series of effects in which attention is increased but comprehension of the target information is decreased, both of these responses being within the reception process. These contrary receptions to humor may then be followed by increased acceptance but decreased retrieval of the conclusions within the acceptance stage of the response process. With these complexities in the response sequence, we can infer that humor is not a tactic to be used lightly.

Humor has more pronounced effects on the affective processes than the cognitive processes shown in Figure 1, such that humor is more likely to facilitate a positive mood and liking of the presenter than facilitating comprehension of the message (Martin, 2007). This may be instrumental in the influence effects of humor. While humorous insertions have an attention grabbing effect, they also tend to distract the audience from the detection of logical flaws within the proposed argument as well as the construction of counter-arguments (Lyttle, 2001; Jones, 2005). This effect has been described in terms of peripheral information processing as opposed to central information processing from Petty's and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion. According to the arguments in the model, humor tends to be processed in a more superficial way focusing on heuristic cues, such as moods and emotions or credibility of the presenter (peripheral processing), rather than being actively elaborated by the recipient (central processing). Peripheral processing of humor can enhance the potential persuasiveness of a message, as the audience considers it less critically, than they do for messages subjected to more central processing (Mackie & Worth, 1989; Lyttle, 2001). The effect observed in these studies is similar to those reported by Forgas (1995; 1998) for positive mood. Inserting humor into a message changes the way a message is processed and the effectiveness of humor will depend on the aims of the presenter.

Proposition 8: The influence effect of managerial humor will be mediated through the more superficial cognitive processing of humorous messages than non-humorous messages.

Overall, then, we have seen that influence, which is getting people to believe and act in a way desired by the manager, and may involve changing people's prior beliefs, as in persuasion, can be quite powerfully affected by the employment of various types of humor. This is a different conclusion from the inference made in several reviews, notably in the fields of media persuasion and advertising, that humor is "unreliable" as a tactic for influence. However, the contingencies for humor's effective use turn out to be dependent on thoughtful anticipation of presenter, recipient, message, and medium.

#### Cognitive-Affective Responses

The cognitive-affective responses to humor, as listed in Figure 1, are drawn from the cognitive-affective processing system (CAPS; Mischel & Shoda, 1998), and identify the self-regulatory reactions of the humor recipient that are activated during the processing (reception and acceptance) of humor messages. These act as mediators of the different humor responses and outcomes. Personal dispositions that are expected to affect the processing of and responses to humor act as antecedents to the CAPS. Situations, including the properties of humor messages, influence behavior through the cognitive and affective responses of individuals. The particular cognitive and affective mediator variables examined may vary, depending upon the situations and behaviors being studied, but most fall within the broad categories of cognitive-affective responses shown in Figure 1 (Mischel, 1973; Mischel & Shoda, 1998).

Encoding process. Encoding of humor will often be an automatic, subconscious process. The experience of positive affect and feelings of amusement or joy, and overt behavior, including smiling and laughter in response to humor may not require a conscious



assessment of the humor message, although some types of humor, such as puns, may be processed more consciously. The encoding of a humor messages may, of course, affect the positivity and negativity of the humor message. What some see as hilarious and respond with laughter, others may view as “obvious,” “trite,” “disgusting” or “sick”.

**Categorizations of self and situation.** In addition to the discriminative competence mentioned previously, the interpretation of situations as humorous or non-humorous will be influenced by norms regarding humor in particular settings and situations and by self-categorizations. For example, attempts at humor will often be ignored or dismissed as frivolous in organizational meetings when serious issues are being discussed and there is a norm that people should “stay focused on the task.” Equally, an individual whose self-schemata (Markus, 1977) is that of a serious, intellectual, non-emotional and rational being may be less likely to respond to certain situations as humorous, even though they fully understand the intentions of a joke or other attempts at humor.

**Self-efficacy.** Self-efficacy refers to expectations about one’s capability to meet the requirements of a task (Bandura, 1997) and is a strong determinant of effectiveness on problem solving and creativity tasks as well as a performance on a range of other organizational tasks (Bandura, 1997; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Within organizations, humorous messages are often delivered as part of a task or in a message that is related to one’s role. Responses to organizational humor will be affected by the self-efficacy expectations related to the task or role that provides the context for the humor message.

**Affective Reactions.** The relationship between self-efficacy and emotional reactions to situations is reciprocal. Judgments of efficacy are influenced by the somatic information conveyed by emotional states, especially for tasks and roles that require coping with stressors (Bandura, 1997). Assessments of self-efficacy that are based on interpretations of emotional reactions will depend upon the labels and attributions used to categorize and explain the

arousal. For instance, if a positive humor message is included with performance feedback then the attributed analysis of emotional reactions may lead to positive self-evaluative reactions and increased efficacy, even if the feedback is negative.

Values, goals and standards. Responsiveness to humor messages will also be influenced by the labels that individuals apply to their own emotional arousal states and the subjective values that they associate with those states and the associated behaviors of smiling and laughter. Those who recognize humor and the associated emotional states as a rewarding and desirable experience will be more responsive to humor messages. The prescription that “laughter is the best medicine” is not true unless one recognizes and experiences the value of positive arousal through humor. Some people simply enjoy a good laugh and will respond to a wide range of humor messages. Others may have different associations with laughter and be more restrained or more circumscribed in their responses to different types of humor.

Personal self-regulatory standards may also influence responsiveness to different types of humor, depending upon the content of the message and the target of the humor. Comedy often derives its humor by challenging values and standards for behavior within a particular community. However, there are limits to what individuals will tolerate in the way of a challenge. Challenges to personal values and standards that do not threaten fundamental beliefs about what is important will be more likely to be perceived as humorous than challenges to more fundamental values and standards. A communication that is labeled as funny by one person may be seen as disgusting, crude or impolite by another because of a difference in personal standards regarding behavior (such as swearing) or the focus of the message. The influence of personal values and standards on humor responses will depend very much on the content of the humor. Religion and national and ethnic identities are among the value-laden topics that run the risk of confronting basic personal standards and

producing a negative response to an attempt at humor. Effective use of derogatory humor, in particular, depends upon the presenter's knowledge of the recipient's values and standards.

To summarize the effects of humor on behavior will depend upon the encoding processes, self- and situational categorizations, self-efficacy expectations, affective reactions and personal values, goals and standards of audience members. Personal and situational determinants of responses to humor, such as individual dispositions and organizational norms, are mediated through the cognitive and affective variables described at either a subconscious or conscious level (Bandura, 1986; Mischel & Shoda, 1998). For example, the discriminative competence of individuals will influence their encoding of messages as either humorous or non-humorous, which, in turn, will determine their positive affect and the resulting laughter or smiling responses. The impacts of personal dispositions and humor messages on personal responses will also be mediated by the recipient's perceived efficacy for coping with the task or role context in which a humor message is embedded, their evaluations of the emotional arousal and feelings they associate with humor in that context and their self-regulatory standards.

Proposition 9: The effect of managerial humor on humor outcomes will be mediated through the cognitive-affective responses of the recipient.

We now turn to an analysis of the potential impacts of humor on two managerial functions, problem solving and creativity.

#### APPLICATION OF THE GENERAL FRAMEWORK

In this section we apply various sections of the general framework to the analyses of humor effects for selected topics within problem solving and creativity within organizations. This selectivity is partly necessary because of the broad nature of the general framework, which is intended to encourage research on the effects of humor on managerial

communications on a wide range of topics and to facilitate the organization of the knowledge acquired from such research.

### Problem Solving

The typical problem-solving process within organizations is highly social, includes extensive communications, requires a mixture of divergent and convergent thinking, and combines rational analyses with emotions (Mintzberg, 1973; Stewart, 1967). Managers define and solve problems in collaboration with other people. The extended social and cognitive processes of managerial problem solving include many sub-processes where humor might influence outcomes. In this section, we will focus on how humor influences information processing at various stages in problem solving by looking at how humor impacts on the encoding processes, how the content of the humor message affects information processing and search processes, and how these effects may be moderated by the type of task or problem being solved.

The encoding process described earlier (see Figure 1) is called *framing* in the behavioral decision theory literature (Bazerman, 1998; Payne et al., 1993; Russo & Schoemaker, 1989; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981) and we will use that term in this discussion. Framing occurs in the early stages of problem solving and influences the definition of the problem, the criteria used to evaluate options, and the reference points or standards used to define success and failure (Russo & Schoemaker, 1989; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Framing typically includes simplification of a task as a means of coping with the potentially overwhelming range of information, values and facts that could be taken into account in even the most mundane of decision processes (Payne et al., 1993). As a result of the simplification, frames are often the source of sub-optimal problem solving (Bazerman, 1998). Frames are typically applied automatically, that is, without conscious consideration of questions such as “what is the relevant standard here”, or “what are some different ways of

looking at the problem?”. Frames build confidence and commitment to decisions partly by masking the ambiguities and contradictions that are characteristic of many complex problems. The framing of problems has been shown to influence attitudes towards risk, the clarity of values, information search, premature commitment to options, and (over-) confidence in the judgments and choices made during problem solving (Russo & Schoemaker, 1989). Framing effects have also been shown to underlie many major decision failures (Bazerman, 1998).

The processing of humor may offset or reduce the simplification of problems that occur due to framing. Many of the frames that individuals and groups evoke when confronting a problem are so deeply ingrained that people become cognitively and emotionally entrenched, even when the frame is clearly (to others, at least) inappropriate for the circumstances. One of the "decision traps" that can arise through the subtle effects of frames is the vigorous application of the wrong frame to the definition of a problem (e.g., Russo & Schoemaker, 1989). Consider the case of senior-level manager of a leading automobile company, who loved his job but also disliked working with his supervisor (see Sternberg, 1998). In an attempt to reframe the problem, he visited a headhunter to find a new job – not for himself, but for his supervisor. Humor typically includes different frames, such as the set up and punch line in a joke, and ambiguity about what comes next (Koestler, 1964). Thus, the use of humor might help managers avoid becoming prematurely locked into a preferred definition of a problem and open them up to a range of alternatives. How might this happen? One possible causal pathway is suggested by the evidence for a positive relationship between creativity and humor, which is discussed in the next section.

Humor may also be used to surface issues or to present competing ideas that may reveal inherent contradictions or ambiguities in a particular approach to a problem, without directly challenging the authority or self-esteem of colleagues. In their analysis of the

functions of humor in a manufacturing organization, Hatch and Ehrlich (1993) found that humor was used to frame a security problem in different ways (e.g., jokes about "big brother") and to highlight the serious but unintended implications of proposed solutions such as loss of staff trust and the inconvenience of having to complete a register. Through the use of humor and the resulting discussion across several meetings, the initial problem of implementing a security system to minimize theft of company assets was analyzed in terms of several different frames. These included low trust and its impact on productivity plus the problem of controlling what people brought into the work plant. In the problem-solving process, humor was used to float alternative frames and to modify the proposed solution, without directly challenging the senior manager who was promoting the new security system.

Proposition 10: Managerial humor (positive or negative) will improve problem solving by encouraging the consideration of multiple frames or alternative problem definitions.

Evidence from mood studies that use positive humor as mood inductions suggests that humor might influence the depth of information processing; however, as discussed below, the effects on problem solving effectiveness will depend upon the type of task. As described earlier, there is evidence that when a message is presented with humor the audience tends to focus more on superficial cues to elaborate the message, such as moods or credibility of the presenter (peripheral processing), rather than actively and critically elaborate the message (central processing; Lyttle, 2001; Jones, 2005). These findings are consistent with a body of research examining the effects of positive affect or mood on the strategies used in problem solving and decision making in which humor is used to induce a positive mood state (e.g., Forgas, 1995; 1998; Isen, 1987). The evidence from these studies leads to the inference that positive humor may actually have a *deleterious* effect on problem solving. For example, Isen and her colleagues have found that individuals in a positive affective state (as in a humor

response) tend to use simplified, speedier approaches to information processing. In the Isen studies, people who were happy were more likely to adopt effort-minimization strategies. It is presumed but not clear from the Isen studies that the speedier processing produced sub-optimal choices. Therefore, the use of humor to create positive feelings during problem solving could lead to the use of simple, less effective strategies.

A limitation in generalizing this conclusion to organizational problem solving is the nature of the tasks used in laboratory studies of mood. Typically, subjects in mood studies work alone, the tasks are brief, and the focus is on a single problem that is isolated from other problems. Most organizational problem solving is either done in groups or involves other people at various stages, the process is fragmented and often conducted over several sessions, and the problem being worked on is frequently connected to a range of other problems that are considered simultaneously (Mintzberg, 1973; Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993). For example, the security problem worked on by managers in the Hatch and Ehrlich (1993) study was discussed at series of meetings and was linked to a range of other problems, including staff morale and productivity. A question of interest, not addressed in the Hatch and Ehrlich (1993) study, is whether humor alleviates cognitive fatigue and re-energizes attention during the prolonged meetings that are often used to solve organizational problems. Research on more extended and more complex problems that are modeled on managerial tasks, but still in laboratory settings, has found that positive affective reactions to problems lead to more effective search and processing strategies (Bandura, 1997; Wood & Bandura, 1989).

Another question not addressed by existing studies is whether different types of humor have different effects on problem solving. The mood manipulations in laboratory studies typically use positive humor to generate positive affective reactions in participants. In organizations, the humor used is frequently negative. In organizations with elitist and meritocratic cultures (Kabanoff, 1994), for example, we could expect greater use of

superiority humor (negative-other humor) as a way of demonstrating competence, which is a key value in a wide range of personnel decisions in both types of organizations. The affective responses to superiority humor by audiences, that is, co-workers or staff, during problem solving may be quite removed from the affective responses generated by positive humor used in mood manipulation studies. In a similar vein, affective reactions to negative humor and their effects on problem solving have rarely been studied but are very relevant for organizations, particular in situations where staff are the target of sarcasm by a leader.

In summary, managerial problem solving is often a social process requiring communications between participants, providing opportunities for the use of humor during different stages in the problem solving process. In particular, we argue that humor will influence the framing of problems during the early stages of problem definition and that different types of humor will exert different effects during the later stages of information processing, judgment and choice. These effects will be mediated by the impact that humor has on the cognitive-affective reactions of the target audience and will be moderated by, for example, the task type.

Manipulations of humor content of messages could be considered by context and audiences to establish the responses, humor and otherwise, of material such as jokes. This could then be used to study the processes outlined in Figure 1. Active humor responses could be assessed by self-report to tap into conscious and also types of subconscious reactions.

### Creativity

In modern organizations, creativity in problem solving and the resulting innovations in products, services and processes are seen as critical to the adaptability and flexibility needed to respond to external threats such as competition and globalization of markets. Increasing pressures for efficiency are often met with continuous improvement programs, process reengineering and organizational learning programs that stress the need for creativity



and innovation. These attempts to institutionalize creativity and innovation rarely consider the role of humor and positive affect. However, many theorists have identified a close parallel between creativity and humor by highlighting the similarity of conditions that define acts of creativity and humor (Koestler, 1964; Levine, 1969; March & Olsen, 1976). Both humor and creativity are associated with conditions that include: (a) incongruity that is resolved by the juxtaposition of different ideas, perspectives or frames; (b) a non-evaluative, playful attitude that is free from the usual constraints imposed by performance goals and rational analyses; (c) heightened attention and conscious processing of information with sudden shifts in the focus of attention to discover new connection or structures; and (d) experiences of pleasurable, positive affect, such as surprise, satisfaction and stimulation.

Correlational studies, that have measured humor both as a temporary state and as a more stable trait, have found a moderate positive relationship between humor and creativity (e.g., O'Quin & Derks', 1997). Creative people have been shown to have a stronger sense of humor than less creative individuals. For example, creative adolescents and college students were found to have a keener sense of humor than their less creative counterparts (Getzels & Jackson, 1962). Families in which parents and children are judged by their work and school peers to be creative, place a much greater value on a sense of humor and imagination and less emphasis on grades than less creative family groups (Amabile, 1996).

The most plausible explanation for the positive relationship between creativity and a sense of humor is that both are the products of a common set of determinants, such as the discriminative competence discussed previously. Creative people simply see more in the situation than their less creative counterparts. They recognize disparate connections and are able to tolerate the tension evoked while seeking resolution, just as occurs in many humorous communications. The cognitive styles that differentiate creative individuals from others typically include a capacity for freeing oneself from the frames and performance scripts that

may channel behavior and being able to suspend judgment or keep an open mind during the receipt of information (Amabile, 1996).

Positive humor can also facilitate creative capabilities. Ziv (1988) found that those exposed to a positive humorous stimulus before taking the standardized Torrance Test of Creative Thinking demonstrated higher levels of flexibility, fluency and originality on the test than those who were not amused. Further support for the beneficial effects of positive humor on creativity can be inferred from studies which have shown that positive affect from experimental mood inductions can lead to higher levels of associative fluency on verbal tasks (Isen, 1987). However, the findings from Isen's studies need to be considered against the work of Amabile (1996) and her colleagues, who have failed to replicate them using a direct measure of the creativity of outputs from more complex tasks. Therefore, while there is some evidence that humor can act as a contextual determinant of creativity outcomes, it is less effective for creativity on complex tasks. However, the causal pathways by which humor exerts an influence on more complex problems has not been well researched.

The potential cognitive and affective pathways between humor and creativity can be mapped onto the processes shown in Figure 1. Firstly, the most commonly noted pathway is through the effects of positive affect, which may in turn affect self-assessments, such as self-efficacy. Positive humor may reduce tension and anxiety resulting in less rigid thinking and enhance the ability to creatively integrate divergent material (Isen, Daubman & Nowicki, 1987). Secondly, humor may also affect creativity through cognitive processes. The flexible thought process and activation of multiple schemas involved in processing incongruity in humor may facilitate flexible and divergent thinking involved in creativity (Belanger et al., 1998). Feeling good as a result of humorous insertions may make a person more playful and more willing to experiment with a range of less obvious alternatives to a problem (Bandura, 1997; Amabile, 1996). A third possible mediation pathway between humor and creativity is

suggested by Amabile's (1996) intrinsic motivation hypothesis, which states that high levels of creativity are only possible when people are intrinsically interested in a task and do not attribute their motivation to extrinsic incentives.

While the meditational roles of affective and cognitive processes in the humor to creativity relationship are far from resolved, the engagement of positive affect does seem to be critical. Isen (1987; Isen, et al, 1987) found a creativity enhancing effect for positive affect whether it was induced in a humorous or non-humorous way suggesting to some that the enhancing effect of humor on creativity is due to positive affect (mirth) rather than more cognitive mechanisms, such as schema activation (Martin, 2007).

Proposition 11: Managerial humor inserted during task performance that leads to enjoyment (positive affect) and attributions of intrinsic interest in the task will enhance creativity.

To summarize, there is some evidence that inducing a humorous response, e.g. by presenting humorous videotapes, facilitates performance on creative problem solving. While early experimental research (Ziv, 1976, 1988) suggested a strong positive impact of induced humor on performance in creativity tests, more recent studies report a more complex set of findings pointing to a set of moderators (e.g., task complexity) and mediator mechanisms (e.g., affective response). The existence of moderating effects might also explain why no significant relationship was found between humor and creativity in some other studies (Clinton, 1995; Feingold & Mazella, 1991).

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The focus in this paper has been on the deliberate use of humor by management in their attempts to persuade, influence and motivate their staff. Working within a social cognitive framework, we were able to link the context and content of humor attempts to a range of organizational behaviors through the cognitive and affective processing dynamics

that produce humor responses. Our review of the available literature suggests some very qualified responses to the questions raised at the beginning of the paper, that is “Should managers deliberately employ humor in their attempts to persuade and motivate their staff?” We conclude that humor can be either an asset or a liability for a manager. This is one of the many features of humor in organizations that makes it worthy of further study.

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**FIGURE 1**

**Overall Framework for Analysing the Role of Humor in Management Applications**